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# Alterity, Marginality and the National Question in the Poetry of the Niger Delta[1]

Oyeniyi Okunoye

"[T]he Niger Delta literary landscape
has continued to flourish
even as its physical environment is wilting."
Joseph Ushie (2006: 22-23)

1 To insist on perpetuating paradigms that affirm the continued relevance of shared experiences across national boundaries as basis for appraising African writing in the twenty-first century is to overlook the fact that much of the African literary imagination is no longer responding to shared experiences the way it did in the years immediately following independence. Malawian writing in the last three decades, for instance, has at once been inspired and conditioned by the damage that the infamous Banda regime, with its policy of censorship and repression, did to the psyche of the people. South African writing since the dawn of democratic governance has also been giving expression to the structural transformations that the collapse of apartheid necessitate in various spheres of the nation's life. The literary practices of African countries with considerable cultural and social diversity engage more issues and problems that reflect their main challenges.

2 Nigeria, the most populous and one of the most ethnically diverse states in Africa, only celebrated her fortieth independence anniversary at the close of the twentieth century. But very many developments have impacted on her literary culture. Notable among these are the civil war that was fought from 1967 to 1970, prolonged exposure to military dictatorship and the tensions and conflicts that mark her political life and agitations of the constituent units within the Nigerian federation. In this regard, an experience that has elicited remarkable poetic response in recent times is the condition of the people of the oil-rich Niger Delta. The scholarly response to the Niger Delta situation has been remarkable but it has also been confined to assessing the social and economic realities that precipitated the collective revolt of the people after the late Ken Saro-Wiwa brought

the plight of the Ogoni people to the attention of the international community. But the neglect of the cultural dimension of the crises necessitates exploring the unique contribution of the region to the making of contemporary Nigerian poetry, especially as it sustains a remarkable trans-ethnic literary practice. Earlier studies on the Niger Delta (Osaghae 1995; Cayford 1996; Travis 1997; Narr 1997; Na-Allah 1998; Osha 2001; Campbell 2002) privilege the experience of the Ogoni, who were the first to initiate sustained resistance and consequently became the most politically visible group in the region. This study seeks to broaden the engagement with the Niger Delta experience by underscoring the shared agony of the people of the region. This is a way of admitting that "[t]he Ogoni situation of land alienation, environmental degradation and government neglect of popular rights [...] is replicated in all oil-producing areas of Nigeria" (Olorode 1998: 2). The study sets out to specifically explore the link between the shared agony of the people of the Niger Delta and a tradition of protest poetry that has been thriving in the region in the past decade[2].

## The Paradox of Location

3 Every informed examination of the Niger Delta experience must proceed from recognising the paradox of its location within Nigeria. While the region is oil-rich, it is also the most marginalized and the least developed[3]. "Nigeria extracts about 93.1 million metric tons of oil annually from its soil to account for 2.9% of world production. The Niger Delta and the sea gulf off its shores, which host over a dozen oil companies, produce what accounts for 80% of Nigeria's annual revenue" (Ejobowah 2000: 33). Ironically, successive Nigerian governments have been responding to the lawful aspirations and claims of the people of the Niger Delta in a repressive manner. The region is made up of minority groups, among whom a certain unity of purpose has nurtured a common culture. In the present thirty-six state federal structure of Nigeria, the "Niger Delta region refers to the area covered by the six states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. It stretches over a continuous rainforest characterised by a beautiful pattern of creeks, streams and rivers" (Ushie 2006: 3). A significant aspect of the Niger Delta experience, which is closely related to identity-formation within the region, is the invention of common expressive strategies. The most apparent of these is the adoption and development of Nigerian Pidgin as a common medium of communication. Nigerian Pidgin is an appropriate medium of communication in the Niger Delta, which is probably Nigeria's most linguistically diverse region. In addition to facilitating trans-ethnic interaction, it has in recent times been a viable medium for mobilising the people for collective resistance. This has, in turn, facilitated the creation and sustenance of a pan-Niger Delta consciousness as the people confront agents of the Nigerian state and multi-national oil companies that have always been seen as accomplices in impoverishing them right from the first revolt that Isaac Adaka Boro led in 1966[4].

4 The people of the Niger Delta consciously define themselves as the "Other" within Nigeria. This is evident in the way they draw attention to their marginal location in the Nigerian project and the growth in various parts of the region of associations and movements committed to articulating and realising their basic rights. The extent to which the Nigerian state has been demonised in the popular imagination and expressive culture of the region confirms their loss of faith in whatever constitutes the Nigerian dream. The Niger Delta, not surprisingly, sustains more resistance movements than any other part of Nigeria. In the words of Said Adejumobi (2003: 171):

> "Between 1990 and 1999, no less than twenty-four ethnic based minority rights groups emerged in the Niger Delta region mostly with radical bent. These include the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Chicoco Movement, Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Ijaw Peace Movement (IPM), Isoko National Youth Movement (INYM), Itsekiri Nationality Patriots, and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP)."

5 While the official response to the agitation of the people represents it as a form of rebellion so as to criminalise their unrelenting and defiant solidarity—as evident in the publication of *Ogoni Crisis: The Untold Story*[5] —peoples of the Niger Delta conceive of their action as lawful and just because it is intended to achieve their ultimate liberation. The proper way to appreciate this is to appraise the worsening condition of the people as having worsened with the attainment of independence. In sum, the paradox of the socio-economic location of the Niger Delta in Nigeria has largely created solidarity among diverse ethnic groups, fostering a culture of resistance in the process. The growth of a literary tradition in this context, especially in the poetic genre, is worth exploring as it is capable of enriching our understanding of a unique cultural practice in the Niger Delta. Appreciating this necessitates recognising the enabling values for the making of a trans-ethnic literary culture in this context.

6 Until very recently, shared ethnic values alone served as basis for studying the works of writers from any part of Nigeria as these were seen as having the potential to account for trends in their creative sensibility. But the hanging in 1995 of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a notable writer and advocate of minority rights, in the context of the struggle against environmental degradation and dehumanisation in Ogoniland, inspired writers within the region to decry the common predicaments of their people. The occasion of lamenting the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders provided the opportunity for the poets to celebrate the cause they died for and, in the process, adopt him as the hero, not only of the Ogoni but also of all the oppressed and impoverished people of the Niger Delta. A clear testimony to this is the number of poetry collections and anthologies inspired by this brutal murder and the various tragedies that have befallen the region—Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs,* Adiyi Bestman's *Textures of Dawn,* Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta,* Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it Was Oil But it Was Blood,* Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* and an anthology edited by E. C. Nwosu entitled *For Ken, For Nigeria.*

## Enduring Ties

7 A perceptive reading of the works of poets from the Niger Delta will reveal an abiding consciousness of the immediate physical environment. This translates in their work into an awareness of the interaction between humanity and Nature that runs through many poems in Gabriel Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation,* Clark-Bekederemo's *A Reed in the Tide* and Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Niger*. It may be argued that much of the work of poets born and raised in the riverine Niger Delta constitutes the corpus of Nigerian poetry with an awareness of Nature. Enquiry about geo-physical setting almost always becomes the necessary starting point for any informed appraisal in the works of these poets. The delta locale is the setting for most of the early poems of Gabriel Okara, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Tanure Ojaide, arguably the best-known poets from the Niger Delta. The liberty with which Okara in particular drew imagery and symbolism from his birthplace betrays the harmony and communion that these poets maintain with their immediate physical environment. It is almost impossible to properly understand "The Call of the River Nun", "Piano and Drums", and "The Snowflakes Sail Gently Down", the most anthologised poems of Okara, without reference to the attachment of the poet to the physical environment of his birthplace. This is also true of Clark-Bekederemo's "Abiku", "Night

Rain", "Streamside Exchange" as well as "Agbor Dancer". This sense of bonding should explain the dominance of visual imagery in their works. Abiola Irele (2001: 182) underscores this in his assessment of Clark-Bekederemo's work, insisting that

> "The fact that much of his [work] revolves around the life and lore of the Niger Delta suggests that this area of the country, with its distinctive landscape and the symbolic associations it generates, not merely as a setting for his work but as its informing spirit, opens for his imagination a singular perspective on the world."

8 Recent experiences have inspired extending an awareness of the link between the human presence and Nature in the poetry of the Niger Delta to an assessment of the damage done to the society. This translates into an almost obsessive concern with the human quest to survive in an environment that was once rich and capable of supporting life. The Nigerian society is held responsible for terminating the age-old attachment of the people of the Niger Delta to their environment. Consequently, successive Nigerian governments emerge in the popular imagination of the people as agents of destruction. Their alliance with multinational companies like Shell, Chevron and Elf with business interests in the oil industry and the ecological disasters they precipitate then constitute the basic concern of much of contemporary Niger Delta poetry in English. This constantly provokes nostalgic reflection on the lost beauty and natural wealth of the region following the discovery and exploration of oil. The prevailing consciousness in this tradition is one of deep hurt and irreparable loss. The injustice and insensitivity that the Nigerian nation has visited on the people intensify the growing interrogation of the Nigerian experience in their popular response. Ojaide projects the collective memory of the people by stressing the tragic loss of the bond they once had with their environment. As is usual with narratives of this nature, the personal becomes a metaphor for the communal:

> "My roots run deep into the Delta area. Its traditions, folklore, fauna and flora no doubt, enriched my *Children of Iroko* and *Labyrinths of the Delta*. This area of constant rains, where we children thought we saw fish fall from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same. By the 1960s the rivers had been dredged to take in pontoons or even ships to enter our backyard. Shell-BP had started to pollute the rivers and streams, and farmlands with oil and flaring gas. Forests had been cleared by poachers and others to feed the African Timber Company in Sapele. Streams and mashes dried up [...]" (Ojaide 1996: 122).

9 He concludes by saying:

> "The world into which I was born has changed drastically over the years. It has gone without being replenished [...]. But the major problem had to do with the discovery of oil in the Delta. The oil boom became doom for inhabitants of the region" *(ibid.)*.

10 Ojaide's recollection, with its inscription of the contrast between the idyllic past and the violated present, captures the shared memory that is given expression in various ways in the works of the poets.

11 In spite of his very short career as a poet[6], Ibiwari Ikiriko's work is probably the most representative of contemporary Niger Delta poetry in the sense that it primarily articulates a regional consciousness. His "Okara's Nun" affirms discursive continuity between earlier poetry from the Niger Delta, appropriately represented by the work of Okara, and recent efforts. It does this by implicating the latter in the new phase that the tradition is assuming. The poem initiates an intertextual dialogue with Okara's reflection in "The Call of the River Nun". Okara's poem affirms the original bond between the people and their environment. But by interrupting the passionate recollection of Okara's

childhood experiences, Ikiriko's poem stages a temporal extension of the discourse initiated in Okara's. This subversive act consequently invents a pan-Niger Delta poetic tradition and also asserts the temporal conditioning of its orientation at different stages. In this case, Ikiriko links up the dislocation of the original inclination of the tradition—an exuberant celebration of communion between the human community and Nature—and the postcolonial tragedy that modernity (masking itself as the discovery and exploration of oil in Nigeria) has precipitated. The apolitical creative inspiration of old has thus given way to anger. The destruction of the harmony with the environment then becomes the driving force for the new culture of protest that defines the reaction of much of recent poetry from the region. By this significant intertextual relationship, the burden of employing poetry in this context for mobilising and conscientising people equally acquires some legitimacy. This implies that the circumstances that limited the aspirations of the older tradition no longer exist, and that the succeeding tradition must adapt itself to prevailing challenges:

> "Okara's
> Silver-surfaced
> Nun
> Is no more.
> Now
> Crude-surfaced
> It lumbers
> Along lifeless,
> Like dead wood.
> Lifeless like
> The dead woods
> That border
> Its crude soiled banks.
> It lumbers,
> Reflecting nothing
> Invoking nothing" (Ikiriko 2000: 25).

12 Replacing the natural with the artificial in the world of the poem immediately becomes a way of inciting dissidence.

## Framing Marginality/Constructing Otherness

13 The Niger Delta experience validates the outlook of Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd (1990: 9) in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* on the conditions that generate minority discursive practices. They argue that

> "[b]ecoming minor is not a function of essence [...] but a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in 'political' terms — that is in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses."

14 It is not difficult to situate the discourse of marginality in the Niger Delta, which has precipitated a deep sense of alienation that inspires a sense of Otherness, in the wider African context even though the region seems to be experiencing a rather unique identity which does not easily fit into the common paradigms in Africa. In post-independence Africa, ethnicity and religion, more than gender and race, frequently precipitate marginal discourses that create conflict situations and assume crises of national dimension, leading in most cases to mass displacement of people and militarisation of the population[7]. Most of these conflicts arise from contestations for political power, and dominant formations often tend to mobilise all the resources at their disposal to either eliminate or decimate

dissidence and any form of resistance to the status quo, while the minority formations, out of the natural instinct for survival also deploy all that is available to them—propaganda, guerrilla action and appeal to international sympathy and intervention—to preserve themselves. The way imagined and lived experiences of marginality are constructed to attract the attention of the international community almost always reveals the capacity of marginal formations to demonise their perceived oppressors. It is not difficult therefore to appreciate the fact that these conflicts almost always border on access to political power and the management of state resources. It is normal for marginal formations to draw attention to their agony and the threat to their survival through the agency of the western media. Marginality in almost every case inspires a sense of being the "Other" and the natural response of those inhabiting the marginal space has been to resist their location by advocating justice and equity, even if this necessitates employing the force of arms. The condition of otherness in turn serves as catalyst for interrogating national identity, leading in some cases to the actual collapse of the state. Thus, marginality, alterity and the interrogation of the nation seem to co-occur together in Africa.

15 The case of the Niger Delta is unique in a way. The emergent pan-Niger Delta identity that has come to be taken for granted in the popular agitation and the creative imagination of the people was originally based on a shared geographical space. But the shared agony of the people based on perceived neglect and exposure to the ecological disasters that result from oil exploration seems, ironically, to have become a stronger basis for a Pan-Niger Delta identity. The process of constructing a common identity for the region itself reveals the dynamic nature of identities in Africa as the symbolic acts of dissent initially conceived by such figures as Adaka Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa in no little way inspired trans-ethnic resistance. Fuelled in recent times by the activities of militants and the increasing influence of militia leaders like Alhaji Mujahid Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom and Soboma George, the growing trans-ethnic dimension of the consciousness in the region now reflects in the names of the new militant groups—Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The condition in the Niger Delta compares with that of Anglophone Cameroon where the experience of marginality is predicated on a colonial affinity with Britain in a state dominated by former French colonial subjects. While linguistic and historical considerations account for the marginal status of the latter, the condition of the people of the Niger Delta is essentially the creation of the postcolonial situation. What the two have in common is the sustenance of trans-ethnic alliance that is given literary and political expression[8].

16 The rest of this paper will examine the way the poetry of the Niger Delta articulates the notion of otherness and interrogates the Nigerian project in framing what has come to be regarded as the Nigerian national question. Such political acts as the drafting of the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* and the proclamation of *The Kaiama Declaration*[9] become symbolic in the sense of asserting the right of the people to political self-determination, and the sentiments they express seem to find ingenious expression in the poetry from the region. The essay will therefore attempt a close reading of selected poems from Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs,* Martin Adiyi Bestman's *Textures of Dawn* and Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* to demonstrate the engagement of the creative imagination in inscribing the collective experience of the people.

17 There is a sense in which Ken Saro-Wiwa's fiction may be seen as representing the consciousness that this paper identifies with the poetry of the Niger Delta. But Saro-Wiwa's preoccupation was basically with his own group, the Ogoni. In this sense, it may only be read as anticipating the flowering of a broader tradition of resistance in the Niger Delta. While Saro-Wiwa's work makes no pretension to a broad—minded pursuit, his goal being the literary statement of his outlook and the claims he makes on behalf of his immediate group, his death inspired much of what now constitutes mainstream Niger Delta poetry, works that specifically respond to the shared agony and desires of the entire region. Consequently, the works of the other writers, by their textual implication of Saro-Wiwa's work, legitimise its participation in this same tradition.

18 Otherness within the Nigerian federal arrangement evokes images that enable the people of the Niger Delta define their symbolic severance from the Nigerian nation. This is why tropes of otherness in the poetry of the Niger Delta are particularly significant. This becomes the recurring strategy by which they creatively conceptualise their collective location and agony. Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Niger,* his first and only collection, consistently validates the otherness of the Niger Delta within the Nigerian context, and its strategy is the blurring of any demarcation between the Niger Delta as a geographical space and its inhabitants. The *self/other* dialectic proves most useful in clarifying the relationship between the Nigerian state and all that represents the oppressed formation that perpetuates the agony of the region in his work. The basic premise in the collection is that the Nature-endowed wealth of the region is used to develop the rest of the country, while the latter is not just neglected but frequently victimised. He creates the impression that Northern Nigeria—which, until the amalgamation, was a separate political entity—is largely responsible for the woes of the region. By inserting the idiom of the North/South dichotomy into the context of Nigerian political discourse as a tool for clarifying power relations, Ikiriko finds a binary mode of cognition relevant. At the heart of this discourse of otherness is an insinuation of internal colonialism. The idiom runs through many poems and underlines economic considerations in exploring the Nigerian national question. Adigun Agbaje and Adewale Adebanwi (2003: 59) buttress this outlook in "The Political Economy of the Problem of Nigerian Statehood", where they argue that "the crafting of the Nigerian state since 1914 has been heavily influenced by economic considerations" and that "economic problems are central not only to the evolving problem of Nigerian statehood but also to its solution". Peter Ekeh (1996: 53) further clarifies this in "Political Minorities and Historically-Dominant Minorities in Nigeria", saying:

> "The Sokoto Caliphate, Moslem Borno, and the non-Moslem areas adjacent to them were conquered by the British and administered together as Northen Nigeria for about ten years from 1903 to 1914. For reasons that had to do largely with the economic insolvency of the new colony to pay for its administrative costs, it was amalgamated with the more economically viable colony of Southern Nigeria in 1914."

19 Ikiriko's "The Palm and the Crude" (2000: 31) appropriates this historical awareness. In constructing an economic history of Nigeria, it privileges the Niger Delta as the source of wealth, suggesting that the transition the country underwent from an agrarian economy consequent upon the discovery and exploration of crude oil to one that is oil-based coincided with its subjugation and "othering":

> "In the beginning
> Was the Palm

And the Palm
Was of us
And the Palm
Was by us
And the Palm
Was with us
Then came the Crude
And the Crude
Was of us
But by them
And with them."

20 But as:

"The Palm
Propelled the pacification process
And with us as proud partners Merchants and Missions
Rode triumphant upland
To let in light
Birth as palm fruits
In the sun" *(ibid.)*.

21 The poet's argument inevitably locates the source of the crisis in the master/servant relationship which seems to have been normalised in the Nigerian political economy. This has seen the exclusion of the oil-producing region from managing and utilising the resources within the region:

"Then came the Crude
And the Crude
Wasted our waters
Soiled our soils
And lacerated our lot
And we, Aborigines
Of the riverside, bereft, stoic,
Wash our palms
With dry spittle
As legs move up to tie hands,
And sahelian
Dunes boom with
Marine doom" (*ibid.:* 31-32).

22 The image of the helpless underdog dominates the representation of the violated in Ikiriko's work, so that in "Them and Us" recourse to the quest for the intervention of the divine, a constant feature of the literature of the oppressed, is evident:

"As jaki the ass
Said to its sahelian Driver:
'Allah alone it is
who will judge the case
between you and me'
So be it between
Us and them—
These lees-louts
Thieves of our everything" (*ibid.:* 24).

23 Tanure Ojaide reveals in "When green was lingua franca", how the Niger Delta has become uninhabitable due largely to the activities of oil companies and allied agencies of government that made no plan for the environmental impact assessment of their activities. His nostalgic recollection of the lost homely and safe environment affirms the

dislocation in the socio-economic routines of the people, ascribing the development to the conspiracy of multinational companies in the oil sector with an uncaring government:

> "Shell broke bond
> with quakes and a hell
> of flares. Stoking a hearth
> under God's own very behind!
> Stop perjuring women for
> Their industry, none of them
> Drove God to the sky's height;
> It wasn't the pestle's thrust
> That caused the eternal rift" (*ibid.:* 13).

24 Adiyi Bestman's perception of the tragic shift in "Kiabara, Dive No More" is no less pathetic, except that it betrays a quiet contemplation of the unpleasant turn of events, not exhibiting the vigorous verbal resistance of Ikiriko's poetry but acknowledging the desolation that has come to be a signal of the imminent threat to human existence in the region. This comes out forcefully in the way he suggests that the environment can no more support life. The warning to the mystery bird Kiabara, says it all:

> "The land is drying out
> Kiabara, can't you see
> for the fish are stiff
> still and swollen with crude?
> fly to distant horizons
> call the gusts
> to flush this desolate web of pain" (Bestman 1998: 41).

25 The hanging of Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists elicited wide-spread condemnation globally, inspiring other poets to lament the dehumanising circumstances of their trial, death and burial, all of which are read as betraying the attitude of the junta to the cause they died for and, by extension, the entire region (Ngaage). Largely inspired by the incident, Ojaide's and Ikiriko's collections frequently allude to the incident, regarding the killing as the culmination of the acts of persecution and victimisation that successive Nigerian governments have subjected the people to. In a sense, the killing, rather than stifle the struggle, seems to have provided the people of the Niger Delta a basis to see their different ethnic formations as pursuing a common cause. Granting Saro-Wiwa visibility in the poems that focus on the killing, such as Ikiriko's "Ogoni Agoni", Bestman's "I Remember that Harmattan Morning they Hanged the Poet" and Ojaide's "Elegy for the Nine Warriors", indicates that the dead, irrespective of the controversies trailing their murder, have already become heroes among their people. Ojaide underscores the solidarity of the people with the immediate victims of this act in "Elegy for the Nine Warriors", implying that they share the same identity on the basis of their physical environment and their experience of oppression in the hands of those who should have been protecting them:

> "We who share the same tenement of the delta
> Should not lose sight of the tear-logged day.
> They could not bear to tear his big heart with shorts
> So they chose to bring him down from the air—
> Human sacrifice to prolong the chieftain's dying rule
> The sun and the world witnessed the spectacle
> & we fellow sons and daughters of the trampled delta
> must not lose sight of the tear—logged day" (Ojaide 1997: 152).

26 Because Ikiriko considers the hanging of Saro-Wiwa along with eight other Ogoni leaders as one of the various acts of state-sponsored terrorism aimed at suppressing popular resistance in the Niger Delta, he opts for cataloguing various dimensions in which the relationship of the people can be represented to stress the primacy of the self/other dichotomy that he adopts in explaining this. He produces, as a lawyer would, many proofs, including the geo-cartographical and the demographic in addition to the historical, which is more familiar, in a bid to establish a case against the Nigerian state. In "Top Upon Bottom" for instance, the geo-cartographic analogy becomes relevant in depicting oppression. The Nigerian map, to him, graphically represents oppression. This may be an unwitting way of implicating nature in the whole discourse:

> "On the globe a broad northern hemisphere
> Sits on a tapering southern hemisphere
> And on many maps as well as ours
> A feeble bottom supports a ruddy top" (Ikiriko 2000: 44).

27 An instance of humorous self-ridicule equally proves useful in defining the implied power relations in "The Minority Man" where the poet-persona claims that his people are

> "Bound to fewness
> Manacled by the tyranny of numbers
> Outnumbered and outmanoeuvred" (*ibid.:* 43).

28 Ikiriko's poems constantly vindicate the victim. His advocacy comes to a climax in the closing poem in his collection, which represents evidence of highhandedness in the relationship between the Nigerian government and the people of the Niger Delta. In a bid to counter the stereotypical way of representing the people of the Niger Delta as implacable, as widely circulated in government propaganda, Ikiriko evokes the gory images of genocide in narrating the effect of the military action ordered against some hoodlums in Odi, an Ijaw settlement, in 1999 under a democratic regime. The official justification of the operation is that it was intended to lead to the arrest of some militant youths alleged to have killed a number of police and army personnel. While not denying the reason for deploying the troops or even absolving the said criminals of blame, in a poem also entitled "Odi", Ikiriko makes effective use of rhetorical strategies that shift the burden of guilt on the state and suggest that the operation was irrational:

> "O, how many corps make a community of corpses?
> How much tears can fill a basket of calamities?
> What Marshal Plan can fill a basket of calamities?
> What gestures can raise ruined relics to mansion?
> O, a brazen demolition of our land and lives
> Has replaced the foxy looting of our lot
> As the tactics shift from marginalization to pacification
> But as no tears can rend a calabash of community will,
> So will Odi rise again
> Like the son on an Easter morning
> And lighten this darkness wreathed Delta" (*ibid.:* 63-64).

## Raising the National Question

29 It would have been strange for the notion of otherness in the poetry of the Niger Delta not to logically provoke the raising of what, in contemporary Nigerian political discourse, has come to be known as the national question, a euphemism for a call for the interrogation of the Nigerian project. To this extent, it does not occur exclusively in the writing and struggle of the people of the Niger Delta, although minority groups tend to be more concerned about it than others. In whatever context it occurs, it draws attention to

the imperfect nature of the Nigerian federal arrangement and the fears, anxieties and sense of insecurity that this engenders among the federating units. The basic reference has always been to the arbitrariness implied in the action of the British colonial establishment to forge a nation out of the two protectorates that existed in what came to be known as Nigeria in 1914. The action, taken by Lord Lugard in his capacity as Governor General and known as the Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in Nigerian political history, has often been identified as responsible for the inability of Nigeria to work. Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas (2001: 29) in accepting this position on the country, state that "Nigeria began as a loose collection of nations, ethnic groups, clans and villages brought together under one roof". But this way of seeing the Nigerian experience does not recognise the fact that national identities have, in most cases been invented. Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose (1993: v) in *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation,* for instance, underline the fact that "race" and "nation" are social constructions rather than naturally occurring phenomena. This in a way suggests that modern states are, after all, not fixed and predictable entities.

30 Various interpretations have been given the Nigerian national question, ranging from those that understand it as suggesting the fragile nature of the country to those that see it as referring to all the issues and problems that must be addressed in order to invent a nation out of the unique Nigerian ethno-cultural situation. J. F. Ade Ajayi (2000: 218) provides a wide-ranging mapping of the problem in "The Nigerian National Question in Historical Perspective", saying:

> "The National Question [...] is the perennial debate as to how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of national resources; debate as to whether or not we are on the right course towards the goals of nationhood; or whether the goal itself is mistaken and we should seek other political arrangements to facilitate our search for legitimacy and development."

31 Oladipo Fashina (1998: 116-117) has, on the contrary, argued that "the national question in Nigeria is primarily a socio-economic and political question couched in the language of demands by ethnic groups for equality and justice". The two views can be reconciled, to the extent that they associate discontent with the raising of the Nigerian national question. The class dimension that Fashina adds simply underscores the primacy of power relations to the problem.

32 Dramatising the national question in the struggle of the Niger Delta has taken various forms, the most significant being the drafting of *The Ogoni Bill of Rights* and the more recent *Kaiama Declaration* which was symbolically made on December 11, 1998 at the birthplace of Isaac Adaka Boro, leader of the first pan-Niger Delta secessionist bid. The inscription of the national question in its various manifestations is a shared preoccupation in the poetry from the Niger Delta in recent times. The poets reflect varying attitudes to it, and a great deal of passion characterizes their exploration. They constantly express loss of faith in the Nigerian nation on the grounds that the interests of the oil-bearing areas are not adequately served[10]. Appraising the situation from the perspective of the violated, Julius Ihonvbere (2000: 107) envisions the prospect of resolving the problem "in federalist Nigeria with autonomy and control granted to the constituent parts".

33 The contemporaneous rendering of the Nigerian national question that one encounters in much of the poetry of the Niger Delta in the past ten years ironically negates what used to

be the attitude of the minority groups of the Niger Delta to the Nigerian project. They had been serious defenders of the federal side during the Nigeria/Biafran war. The new trends in the poetry from the area will then represent a change of position dictated by expediency. Interestingly, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Songs in a Time of War,* a collection that brings together poems inspired by the war itself, best confirms the initial preference of the minority groups for preserving Nigeria.

34 "Dis Nigeria Sef", the longest poem in *Songs in a Time of War,* which is written in Pidgin English, is a significant exploration of the national question which is yet to be adequately taken into account to determine its political significance. Running into two hundred and seventy-six lines, the poem, which takes the form of a direct address to a personified Nigeria, adopts a humorous tone to facilitate its critical intent. As in the rest of the collection, the poet-persona maintains the posture of a proud Nigerian citizen in commenting on the war. A casual reading of the collection will reveal his apathy to the war itself, preoccupied as it is with the personal and the amorous, a way of disregarding the anger and bitterness that inspired the Biafran war. This comes out clearly in "Epitaph for Biafra" which dismisses the war as ill-advised and needless.

35 Speaking as a Nigerian in "Dis Nigeria Sef" places the poet-persona in a position to examine facts of Nigerian life against the backdrop of the popular disenchantment with the Nigerian project, concluding on a note that endorses the Nigerian idea. He starts by decrying the stasis and indiscipline that characterize the nation's life. But rather than register a position on the artificiality of the Nigerian union, he privileges the Nigerian national character, indicating that a shared but odious identity has emerged from the Amalgamation. Then he abruptly shifts away from indicting the country to celebrating it, blending the trivial with the serious and emphasizing the beauty of the land, the abundance of her resources, the splendour of her culture, and the potentials of her people as a way of suggesting that the diversity that defines the Nigerian identity is also her asset which will be lost if the nation should disintegrate. The wisdom in identifying with Nigeria comes out clearly in this poem, apparently to counter the motive for the Biafran secession:

> "If I tire sef, whossai I go go?
> Nigeria and myself na one belly
> If 'e headache, me I get bellyache
> If 'e no get to chop, me I go hungry qua
> Nigeria and myself we be prick and blokkus:
> Prick get up begin de do
> E go tire after some time
> Because agaacha must come back
> Agaracha must come back
> When e return, blokkus dey wait for am
> Person no fit tire for dis Nigeria" (Saro-Wiwa 1985: 42).
> "[If] I am tired, where can I go?
> Nigeria and I are inseparable
> If she has headache, I will also develop stomach disorder
> If she is starving, I will immediately become hungry
> Nigeria and I are like penis and scrota:
> When penis in erection withdraws for a while
> It eventually gets tired and returns
> Because the arrogant agaracha must return
> Agaracha must return

The scrota will await its return
One cannot be tired of this Nigeria]" (translation not in the original text).

36 Saro-Wiwa's poetry belongs in the phase of his creative and political life in which he not only identified with, but actually propagated, the Nigerian project to the extent of even demonizing its enemies. In a sense, "Dis Nigeria Sef" gives voice to what used to be the traditional stance of minorities in Nigeria. It is in the work of Ikiriko and Ojaide that one encounters a contemporaneous response to the national question.

37 The political intent of much of recent Niger Delta poetry emerges in an unpretentious manner. This, in the work of Ikiriko, is immediately evident in the way the poet-persona deliberately suppresses his Nigerianness and asserts an alternative mode of self-definition based on an evolving collective identity in the Niger Delta. In "Oily rivers", for instance, there is an attempt to propagate an alternative identity:

"I come from
The bottom of
The amalgam,
The base Delta,
Where the things are made base,
And beings become base,
Leesed by
Powered policies
As crude as petroleum
I am of
The Oil River,
Where rivers are
Oily
And can
Neither quench my thirst
Nor
Anoint my head" (Ikiriko 2000: 20).

38 Conscious self-definition assumes another dimension when the persona recognizes the need to justify the loss of faith in Nigeria. In "Base Compass", the doubts and fears of the minority groups with regard to the direction and vision that Nigeria as a nation is pursuing provide a basis for making a case for the people to redefine their relationship. Ikiriko adopts images evoking confusion, loss and imminent danger in describing the Nigerian experience, rendering same in the homely idiom of traveling on the sea. By claiming experiential affinity to the Aborigines of Australia, whose dilemma is a classic metaphor for unjust displacement and reprehensible marginalization, Ikiriko reinforces the urgency of redressing the plight of his people:

"We have set sail
On a ship of state
With a baseless compass,
Bereft of our cardinal point.
So we aborigines of the base,
Stay, shattered like
A calabash of crabs
Crashed on concrete" (*ibid.:* 21).

39 If readiness to renounce the Nigerian identity serves as the defining feature of Ikiriko's response to the national question, Ojaide's work is rather ambivalent. While not denying the basic motivation for decrying the deprivations and neglect of the people of the Niger Delta, it accommodates conflicting modes of self-definition. The persona's identity

constantly shifts between asserting his Nigerianness to endorsing the trans-ethnic unit of identity that is localized in the Niger Delta. This implies that for the poet, the Nigerian project would have been a good idea if it had been allowed to work. Inventing a new identity for the hitherto oppressed out of the existing national arrangement will then be the last resort if the Nigerian project fails. Ojaide clarified his attitude to the Nigerian project in an interview:

> "Nobody from the Niger Delta or oil-producing area is happy with the way Nigeria is governed now. There must be a fair principle that will take note of their rights, sacrifices, and their ability to control or share in their God-given land. It is a very clear way of interrogating the Nigerian nation" (Okunoye 2000: 229).

40 Ojaide's way of posing the national question is dispassionate largely because it is informed by lived experience. He does not necessarily blame the failure of the Nigerian state on the Amalgamation. On the contrary, he draws attention to the visionless leadership that made the Nigerian idea a constantly deferred dream. The Nigerian union therefore becomes, in his estimation, a meaningless project, revealing both a lack of courage to invent a nation and the inability of successive leaders of the most populous Black nation to transform the country's size and population into a source of strength. But the effort of the poet appears more as a ridicule of the failure of the Nigerian state. He wonders why, unlike America and other modern states created out of diverse groups, the Nigerian experiment has not worked. This comes out more as an act of collective self-interrogation than as an effort to completely disown Nigeria.

41 Ojaide occasionally represents the Amalgamation of 1914 as a fruitless marriage because it has not produced enduring bonds that may be read as cementing Nigerian peoples. The state of the union becomes difficult to explain as it is neither a broken relationship nor a consummated marriage. This inability to move beyond negotiating to agreeing to stay together is, in his judgement, unreasonable, a sad commentary on the inability of Nigerian peoples to move beyond petty and clannish cleavages to invent a nation. In a tone betraying collective self-indictment, Ojaide (1997: 16) says in "Seasons":

> "We spent more than thirty years of marriage,
> Debating whether we should live together or split—
> We are fast passing the season of child-bearing
> Should scales form the rough edges of our pots?
> Should number alone fool us into believing that
> Giants for all their muscles could not be impotent?
> We are a market of acquaintances, bound to
> Always haggle over what we sell or buy away.
> No one doubts anymore the fortune slipping away."

42 This way of problematising the Nigerian national question simply locates it within the larger crisis of nationhood that has characterized the Nigerian union and projects the sense of despair and frustration that runs through the works of many other Nigerian poets that are not from the Niger Delta region.

43 If the apparently political has been central to the exploration of the poetry of the Niger Delta, it is only because it is in the first place a product of an ugly political situation. This immediately raises questions that border on the increasing immersion of much of contemporary Nigerian writing in concrete historical reality. Attempts at clarifying commitment in this context have more often than not been confined to expounding political convictions that are seen as capable of transforming society. This partly accounts for the proliferation of treatises authored by renowned writers that not only

diagnose but also prescribe a direction for the Nigerian society. Notable among these are Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* and Wole Soyinka's *The Open Sore of a Continent.*

44 To speculate on the direction that the poetry of the Niger Delta will take in the foreseeable future will amount to unnecessary star-gazing. So long as the region sustains a tradition of poetry that is unique in the sense of blending a sense of history with an awareness of the human condition, it is safe to assume that the fortunes of the people that inspire it will continue to dictate its orientation. The loss of faith in Nigeria that runs through much of recent poetry from the region is, therefore, best understood as a testimony to the failure of the Nigerian federation to secure the interests of all her people. While it may be difficult to immediately associate the drafting and circulation of documents such as *The Ogoni Bill of Rights* and *The Kaiama Declaration* with the poetic output from the Niger Delta in recent times, a more perceptive consideration will reveal their essential connection in terms of the sensibility they articulate: a symbolic severance of faith in the Nigerian state and a tacit bewailing of the fraud that self-government in most of Africa has been. This explains why weeping defines the mood running through Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs.* In sum, the poetry of the Niger Delta at the moment does not only give voice to the feelings and dreams of the individual poets but translates the shared yearnings of the people of the region for justice and equity. In this sense, it affirms the inevitability of inventing a new identity in a crisis-ridden state and also confirms that the ethnic agenda articulated in the blueprints presented by the Ogoni and the Ijaw in the past actually inscribe the shared desires of the peoples of the entire region. To this extent, the literary rendering of the Niger Delta experience draws inspiration from the same source with the political actions.

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## NOTES

**1.** The first draft of this paper was written during my residency as Harry Oppenheimer Visiting Scholar at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa, in the last quarter of 2004. I am grateful to the Harry Oppeinheimer Institute for the award and also thank Chijioke Uwasomba for being very generous with relevant literature on the Niger Delta.
**2.** This refers to the period after the controversial hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni activists.
**3.** Official acknowledgement of the deplorable state of social infrastructure in the Niger Delta and the neglect of the people took the form of establishing agencies that are to serve as catalyst for development in the region. The first was the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) that was established with Decree 23 of 1992. The Obasanjo administration replaced this with the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).
**4.** The first attempt at secession in the Niger Delta was led by Isaac Adaka Boro in 1966. He was arrested and killed. Expectedly, new militant leaders in the region like Mujahid Asari Dokubo of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, acknowledge deriving inspiration from Boro. It should not be surprising that *The Kaiama Declaration* of the Ijaw youth was symbolically made in his birthplace.
**5.** This is a propaganda document that the Abacha-led junta issued in the wake of the international outcry against the killing of Saro-Wiwa along with other Ogoni activists.
**6.** Ikiriko died not long after his first and only collection was published.
**7.** The state in many cases simply collapses in the process. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Chad, Ivory Coast, Congo Democratic Republic, Algeria, Sudan, Cameroon and Uganda have witnessed various conflicts arising from imagined or lived experience of

marginalisation which normally creates a situation in which the majority—almost always the powerful—are pitched against those in the minority.

**8.** The alliance of Anglophone Cameroonians of the North West and the South West, who constitute the minority formation in relation to their Francophone compatriots, is meant to achieve a goal similar to that pursued by the people of the Niger Delta. Incidentally, the literary works of Bate Besong, Bole Butake, Fru Ndoh, Victor Epie Ngome and Anne Tanyi Tang also give voice to their plight and their legitimate dreams. See FANDIO (2004) and KONINGS & NYAMNJOH (2000).

**9.** The Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Kaiama Decalaration are major blueprints that assert the claims of the Ogoni and the Ijaw nationalities in the Niger Delta. While the first was drafted and presented to the Nigerian Government by the Ogoni in 1990, the second was symbolically proclaimed in Kaiama, the birthplace of Isaac Adaka Boro, the leader of the first secessionist movement in the Niger Delta, by Ijaw youth. The documents articulate the discontent of these groups and hint at their readiness to assert their autonomy. See <//www.mosop.net/MosopOBR.htm>.

**10.** The main issues here concern the need to adequately attend to the peculiar infrastructural needs and ecological problems of the region as well as the very many environmental problems that attend oil exploration. Closely tied to this is the anxiety as to what the future holds for the region after the oil reserve must have been exhausted.

## RÉSUMÉS

*Marginalité, altérité et la question de la nation dans la poésie du détroit du Niger.* — En tentant de témoigner de la complexité croissante de la géographie littéraire en Afrique et en portant les études sur la région du détroit du Niger au Nigeria dans la sphère culturelle, cet article attire l'attention sur la tradition poétique singulière de cette région. En soulignant la préoccupation constante pour le lien entre l'Homme et la nature dans l'imagination créative des poètes du détroit du Niger, l'article établit une continuité entre les œuvres de vieux poètes comme Gabriel Okara et John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo d'une part, et celles de Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Martins Adiyi-Bestman et Ibiwari Ikiriko, d'autre part. En s'appuyant sur les idées issues de pratiques discursives minoritaires et sur la pratique de la lecture rapprochée pour construire une tradition littéraire trans-ethnique, nous nous pencherons en particulier sur les œuvres de Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide et Ibiwari Ikiriko qui présentent des expressions articulées des sentiments et des préoccupations caractérisant la poésie du détroit du Niger. Pour cela, nous privilégierons les rêves et contestations collectifs populaires qui trouvent une expression dans leur poésie: une insistance à reconnaître l'altérité du détroit du Niger au sein du Nigeria et les interrogations qui en découlent concernant le projet nigérian. Cette étude est, intrinsèquement, un exposé préliminaire sur une tradition en évolution qui démontre comment la pratique poétique est impliquée dans la dynamique de la formation de l'identité dans le détroit du Niger.

In a bid to confirm the growing complexity of African literary geography and also extend the scholarly engagement of the experience of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to the cultural sphere, this paper draws attention to the unique poetic tradition that the region sustains. Underscoring the enduring concern with the link between humanity and nature in the creative

imagination of poets from the Niger Delta, it establishes continuity between the efforts of older poets like Gabriel Okara and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, and those of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Martins Adiyi-Bestman and Ibiwari Ikiriko. Utilizing insights drawn from minority discursive practices and the strategy of close reading in constructing a trans-ethnic literary tradition, it takes the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide and Ibiwari Ikiriko in particular as presenting articulate expressions of the sentiments and distinctive concerns of the poetry of the Niger Delta, privileging the collective dreams and contestations of the people that find expression in their poetry: insistence on registering the otherness of the Niger Delta within Nigeria and the consequent interrogation of the Nigerian project. The study is, in essence, a preliminary statement on an evolving tradition which demonstrates the manner in which poetic practices are implicated in the dynamics of identity formation in the Niger Delta.

## INDEX

**Keywords :** identity, marginality, poetry, Niger Delta, alterity, national question, postcolony
**Mots-clés :** identité, marginalité, poésie, détroit du Niger, altérité, question de la nation, postcolonie

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